

The impact on native herpetofauna due to traffic collision at the interface between a suburban area and the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area: an ecological disaster?

Danny Wotherspoon^{1,2} and Shelley Burgin^{2,3}

¹ School of Natural Sciences, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, South Penrith Distribution Centre, 1797, Australia.

² Abel Ecology, 113 Chapman Parade, Faulconbridge, 2776, Australia.

³ Corresponding author: Professor Shelley Burgin, School of Natural Sciences, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, South Penrith Distribution Centre, 1797, Australia.

Email: s.burgin@uws.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Vehicle collision resulting in animal mortality is a common daily occurrence, although few studies have considered the impact on herpetofauna in urban areas. Over a 7 year period (2003 - 2010), 1.4 km of suburban streets of Faulconbridge that interface with the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, west of Sydney, was surveyed on foot two to four days a week, typically soon after dawn. Over the period a total of 86 reptiles that represented 20 species: 38% of the lizard and 56% of snake species known from the area were collected as road kills due to collision with vehicles. This equated to approximately one individual per month that was collected across the 7 years. Representatives of six frog species were also identified as road kills (33% of the local frog fauna). In Faulconbridge, 20-30 km of 50 km/hr roadways interface with the national park and there are 26 towns within the World Heritage Area. Each of these towns has a network of streets that covers much more than just the perimeter of the town, and there are two major highways that bisect the World Heritage Area. Although an average death rate of one reptile per month may be considered negligible, the cumulative loss of reptiles due to vehicle collision in the region is an ecological disaster.

Key words: reptiles, frogs, World Heritage Area, urban - bushland interface, animal mortality, vertebrate road kill

Introduction

Vehicle collision, resulting in animal mortality, is a common daily occurrence in Australia (Ramp and Roger 2008; Taylor and Goldingay 2004) and beyond (Ashley and Robinson 1996; Glista *et al.* 2007; Smith and Dodd, 2003). Animals ranging in size from invertebrates (e.g., Seibert and Conover 1991) to vertebrates are affected (e.g., macropods – Coulson 1989; Lee and Croft 2008; Ramp and Ben-Ami 2006; Ramp and Roger 2008; birds - Burgin and Brainwood 2005; Loos and Kerlinger 1993; herptofauna - Glista *et al.* 2007; Langen *et al.* 2009; Szerlag and McRobert 2006).

A substantial number of the previous studies have focused on vehicle collisions with large vertebrates on open roads (e.g., Abu-Zidan *et al.* 2002; Klockeer *et al.* 2006; Lee *et al.* 2004; Ramp and Roger 2008). These studies have often been underpinned by concern for human safety and the associated physical and psychological trauma, and/or property damage, including insurance and economic losses. Such collisions have been responsible for the decline in some populations of native species, including the koala *Phascolarctos cinereus* (ANZECC 1998), Tasmanian devil *Sarcophilus harrisii*, and eastern quoll *Dasyurus viverrinus* (Jones

2000). In addition, a wide range of smaller animals have been reported on, including small mammals, birds, and amphibians (Baker *et al.* 2004; Burgin and Brainwood 2008; Clevenger *et al.* 2003) where the long-term impact on populations is less clear. In general, studies have focused on a single species or limited group of animals, and tend to be based around major transport linkages (e.g., Taylor and Goldingay 2004; Ramp *et al.* 2005), although there are exceptions (e.g., Burgin and Brainwood, 2008).

Less commonly investigated are road kills in peri-urban/urban areas. Exceptions include an investigation of the swamp wallaby *Wallabia bicolor* in southern Sydney (Ramp and Ben-Ami 2006), and deer *Odocoileus* spp. in Edmonton, Canada (Ng *et al.* 2008). Other researchers have investigated a broader range of taxa. For example, Harris *et al.* (2008) surveyed a roadway in the Narrabeen catchment in urban Sydney and reported the numbers of deaths of swamp wallaby, brushtail possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*, and long-nosed bandicoot *Perameles nasuta* but commented on the ‘noticeable absence of small fauna’. Brainwood and Burgin (2008) observed that most species found dead on peri-urban roads were native, with approximately equal numbers of mammals and birds.

The main factors that influence fauna mortality on urban/peri-urban roads include distance from vegetative cover, type of road (Clevenger *et al.* 2003), presence/absence of barriers and mown verges, and seasonal activity patterns (Brainwood and Burgin 2008; Clevenger *et al.* 2003) that include a range of behavioural, ecological, and biological behaviours (Fahrig and Rytwinski 2009).

There are 26 towns surrounded by natural vegetation in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. Most of these towns are distributed along a highway on the main ridgeline running through the area (Anon. undated). The linear nature of the highway and urban zones in such a vast natural area presumably increases the potential for negative effects of vehicle collision on the local fauna. Reptiles are particularly vulnerable, because roadways offer open, relatively warm basking areas compared to the surrounding landscape (Tanner and Perry 2007). The allure of roadways is likely to be greatest at the edge of settlements where roads are in proximity to natural vegetation.

Herpetofauna tends to be under-reported in studies of road kills due to their seasonality, for example, Burgin and Brainwood (2008) did not collect any because their study was restricted to the cooler months of the year. Reptiles and frogs may also be under-represented in road kill studies as most are small and readily removed from roads by scavengers and predators, or the carcasses may be lost due to further collisions with vehicles. Data are, therefore, lacking on the loss of herpetofauna due to vehicle collision, even in urban areas.

As indicated above, most previous studies of collision with vehicles have been based on accidents on open roads. Despite the ecological significance of the surrounding landscape, no previous studies appear to have addressed road kill in suburban areas surrounded by natural bushland. In this paper we document road mortality of herpetofauna, with particular emphasis on reptiles, due to collision with vehicles at the urban - bushland interface at Faulconbridge in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. In this paper we quantify the numbers and species of herpetofauna killed in vehicle collision along a low-traffic volume, speed-limited urban road at the interface with the World Heritage Area.

Site Description

The study was undertaken at the interface between the town of Faulconbridge, and national estate lands of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, west of Sydney. The region is environmentally one of the most highly valued and comprehensively protected areas in Australia. In the 50 years since the initial creation of the Blue Mountains National Park, the conserved area has continued to expand (NPWS 2001). Several adjoining National Parks are now collectively regarded as part of the Greater Blue Mountains area (Jamieson 2001). It has unique geology and biodiversity, and was considered of sufficient international significance to be declared a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's World Heritage Estate because of the area's natural values (UNESCO 2009; Commonwealth Government 2009).

The park is centred around a deeply-dissected, sandstone plateau covering 247,000 ha with its highest point approximately 1,100 m above sea level (Jamieson 2001). The majority of the area is naturally vegetated 'Sydney Sandstone Ridgetop Woodlands' (cf. Benson 2002), with a dominate tree cover composed mainly of *Eucalyptus* species and *Angophora costata* with a shrubby understorey (Dragovich and Morris, 2002). Most of this bushland is in good ecological condition (Commonwealth Government 1998). The region has historically witnessed considerable conflict between development and conservation (Moseley 1999) with increased urban, tourism, and/or infrastructure development frequently the cause of friction within the community. Environmental conflicts most often arise in the 90 km string of settlements, stretching from Penrith in the east to Mt Victoria and Lithgow in the west. The highway and associated ridge-top development bisects the World Heritage Area and houses a population of 74,067 residents at census 2006 (Blue Mountains Local Area; ABS, 2007). It also attracts large, although shrinking number of tourists (TRA, 2010).

Faulconbridge (33°42'0S, 150°31'60E) is one of the long-established towns of the area (BMCC, 2002). Approximately 75 km west of Sydney, at an altitude of 400 m, it has an annual average rainfall of 1,275 mm which falls mostly in summer (www.bom.gov.au). In the 2006 census the recorded population was 4,014 (ABS, 2007). Like many urban areas in New South Wales, the speed limit of the streets is 50 km hour. There are also road signs warning of wildlife in the area, and the traffic flow is of low density. Although there is no quantification of traffic volume in the streets used in this study, in consultation with Glenn Sherlock (Strategic Planning Specialist – Transport, Blue Mountains City Council) we estimated that there are approximately 400 vehicle movements per day through the streets sampled for herpetofauna.

Methods

Sampling was repeatedly undertaken between January 2003 and April 2010. Herpetofauna were collected from a 1.4 km length of urban streets in residential Faulconbridge within the 50 km/hour speed zone. The streets surveyed were on a ridge top with, at most, a single residential dwelling between the paved roadway and natural bushland. Alternatively, dwellings were restricted to one side of the roadway with bushland to the roadway on the other side. There were equivalent distances of street with and without a dwelling between the paved roadway and the bushland.

The surveys took place at dawn or soon afterwards on two to four days/week; a few surveys were conducted at dusk. Reptiles found dead on the road were collected. Individuals were identified and, where feasible, snout - vent length of lizards was measured. When frogs were found, only the species identity was recorded.

To determine the list of reptile and frog species killed in the wider area, records of the Atlas of New South Wales (NSW) Wildlife (the Atlas) for the lower Blue Mountains from Glenbrook (200 m altitude) to Hazelbrook (700 m altitude) and records of the NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service (WIRES) for the years 1991 to 2009

were consulted. These species lists were supplemented with additional species known to be present from casual observations, documented fauna surveys submitted to Blue Mountains City Council, and from the data files of Abel Ecology. The final species list, therefore, was more inclusive than standard references for the area's herpetofauna (Cogger 1992; Swan 1990; Swan *et al.* 2004).

Results

A total of 86 individuals encompassing 20 reptile species: 11 species of lizards (51 individuals) and 9 snake species (35 individuals) were collected (Table 1). Based on these numbers, an average of 12.29 reptiles are killed on the Faulconbridge streets of the study area each year. Freshly-killed animals were found in both early morning and late afternoon. The hard, outer integument of reptiles often survived repeated impacts with vehicles, and exposure to the elements after death, so that identification of complete and partial carcasses was nearly always possible.

The number of road-killed lizard species was equivalent to 38% of those recorded for the area, and the number of snake species was equivalent to 56% of those recorded for the area (see Table 1). Some reptiles were not recorded as road kills, for example, one species of monitor and turtle were observed alive on the road, but not found as road killed animals.

Table 1. Species list of reptiles collected for the Faulconbridge area (data consolidated from the Atlas of New South Wales, NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service, 1991 – 2009, casual observation, documented fauna surveys submitted to Blue Mountains City Council, and data files of Abel Ecology) (*roadkills collected during the current study)

| Common name | Scientific name | Conservation status |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Reptiles | | |
| diamond python | <i>Morelia spilota spilota</i> | Common |
| common death adder | <i>Acanthophis antarcticus</i> | Common |
| *yellow-faced whip snake | <i>Demansia psammophis</i> | Common |
| *mustard-bellied snake | <i>Drysdalia rhodogaster</i> | Common |
| green tree snake | <i>Dendrelaphis punctulata</i> | Common |
| *golden-crowned snake | <i>Cacophis squamulosus</i> | Common |
| *eastern small-eyed snake | <i>Cryptophis nigrescens</i> | Common |
| red-naped snake | <i>Furina diadema</i> | Common |
| *marsh snake | <i>Hemiaspis signata</i> | Common |
| broad-headed snake | <i>Hoplocephalus bungaroides</i> | 1 Endangered, 2 Vulnerable |
| eastern tiger snake | <i>Notechis scutatus</i> | Common |
| *red-bellied black snake | <i>Pseudechis porphyriacus</i> | Common |
| *eastern brown snake | <i>Pseudonaja textilis</i> | Common |
| black-headed snake | <i>Suta spectabilis ssp dwyeri</i> | Common |
| *bandy bandy | <i>Vermicella annulata</i> | Common |
| *blind snake | <i>Ramphotyphlops nigrescens</i> | Common |
| *stone gecko | <i>Diplodactylus vittatus</i> | Common |
| *Lesueur's velvet gecko | <i>Oedura lesueuri</i> | Common |
| broad tailed gecko | <i>Phyllurus platurus</i> | Common |
| thick tailed gecko | <i>Underwoodisaurus milii</i> | Common |
| Burton's snake-lizard | <i>Lialis burtonis</i> | Common |

Jacky dragons (24%) were the most commonly encountered reptile species killed on the road. Road-killed Jacky Dragons ranged from 26 - 125 mm, the whole recorded size range of the species. Seven of these dragons (33%) were 100 mm or greater. Snakes were also frequently encountered, most commonly the eastern small-eyed snake *Cryptophis nigrescens* (12%), blind snake *Ramphotyphlops nigrescens* (10%), and golden-crowned snake *Cacophis squamulosus* (6%; Figure 1).

The extent of bushland on either side of the road appears to have had an effect on the types of reptiles found as road-kills. In the study area, two species of snake and two lizard species, representing 5% of the reptile collected, were only found on sections of road with dwellings on both sides. These were red-bellied black snake *Pseudechis porphyriacus*, bandy-bandy snake *Vermicella annulata*, eastern bearded dragon *Pogona barbata*, and gecko *Diplodactylus vittatus*. The remaining 95% of reptiles collected were found both on sections of road with houses both sides, and where there were houses one side and bush on the other side.

Representatives of six species of frogs were found killed by vehicle collision, 33% of the species known for the area (Table 1). While five of the species were considered common, the red-crowned toadlet *Pseudophryne australis* is classified 'vulnerable' under the New South Wales Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.

| Common name | Scientific name | Conservation status |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| *scaly-foot lizard | <i>Pygopus lepidopodus</i> | Common |
| mountain dragon | <i>Amphibolurus diemensis</i> | Common |
| *Jacky dragon | <i>Amphibolurus muricatus</i> | Common |
| *bearded dragon | <i>Pogona barbata</i> | Common |
| eastern water dragon | <i>Physignathus lesueurii</i> | Common |
| Swanson's limbless skink | <i>Anomalopus swansonii</i> | Common |
| *eastern blue-tongue skink | <i>Tiliqua scincoides</i> | Common |
| rainbow skink | <i>Carlia tetradactyla</i> | Common |
| fence skink | <i>Cryptoblepharus virgatus</i> | Common |
| striped skink | <i>Ctenotus robustus</i> | Common |
| coppertail skink | <i>Ctenotus taeniatus</i> | Common |
| eastern she-oak skink | <i>Cyclodomorphus michaeli</i> | Common |
| *pink-tongued skink | <i>Cyclodomorphus gerrardii</i> | Common |
| Cunningham's skink | <i>Egernia cunninghami</i> | Common |
| black crevice skink | <i>Egernia saxatilis</i> | Common |
| White's rock skink | <i>Egernia whitii</i> | Common |
| eastern water skink | <i>Eulamprus quoyii</i> | Common |
| *banded skink | <i>Eulamprus tenuis</i> | Common |
| *grass skink | <i>Lampropholis delicata</i> | Common |
| *garden skink | <i>Lampropholis guichenoti</i> | Common |
| *weasel shade skink | <i>Saproscincus mustelina</i> | Common |
| red-throated skink | <i>Acritoscincus platynota</i> | Common |
| yellow-bellied three-toed skink | <i>Saiphos equalis</i> | Common |
| lace monitor | <i>Varanus varius</i> | Common |
| Frogs | | |
| green tree frog | <i>Litoria caerulea</i> | Common |
| Blue Mountains tree frog | <i>Litoria citropa</i> | Common |
| bleating tree frog | <i>Litoria dentata</i> | Common |
| *eastern dwarf tree frog | <i>Litoria fallax</i> | Common |
| Jervis Bay tree frog | <i>Litoria jervisiensis</i> | Common |
| *Peron's tree frog | <i>Litoria peronii</i> | Common |
| leaf green tree frog | <i>Litoria phyllochroa</i> | Common |
| laughing tree frog | <i>Litoria tyleri</i> | Common |
| Verreaux's tree frog | <i>Litoria verreauxii</i> | Common |
| *common eastern froglet | <i>Crinia signifera</i> | Common |
| giant burrowing frog | <i>Heleioporus australiacus</i> | I, 2 Vulnerable |
| *eastern banjo frog | <i>Limnodynastes dumerilii</i> | Common |
| *brown-striped frog | <i>Limnodynastes peronii</i> | Common |
| spotted grass frog | <i>Limnodynastes tasmaniensis</i> | Common |
| Haswell's toadlet | <i>Paracrinia haswelli</i> | Common |
| *red-crowned toadlet | <i>Pseudophryne australis</i> | I Vulnerable |
| smooth toadlet | <i>Uperoleia laevigata</i> | Common |
| Tyler's toadlet | <i>Uperoleia tyleri</i> | Common |

¹ New South Wales Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995² Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, 1999

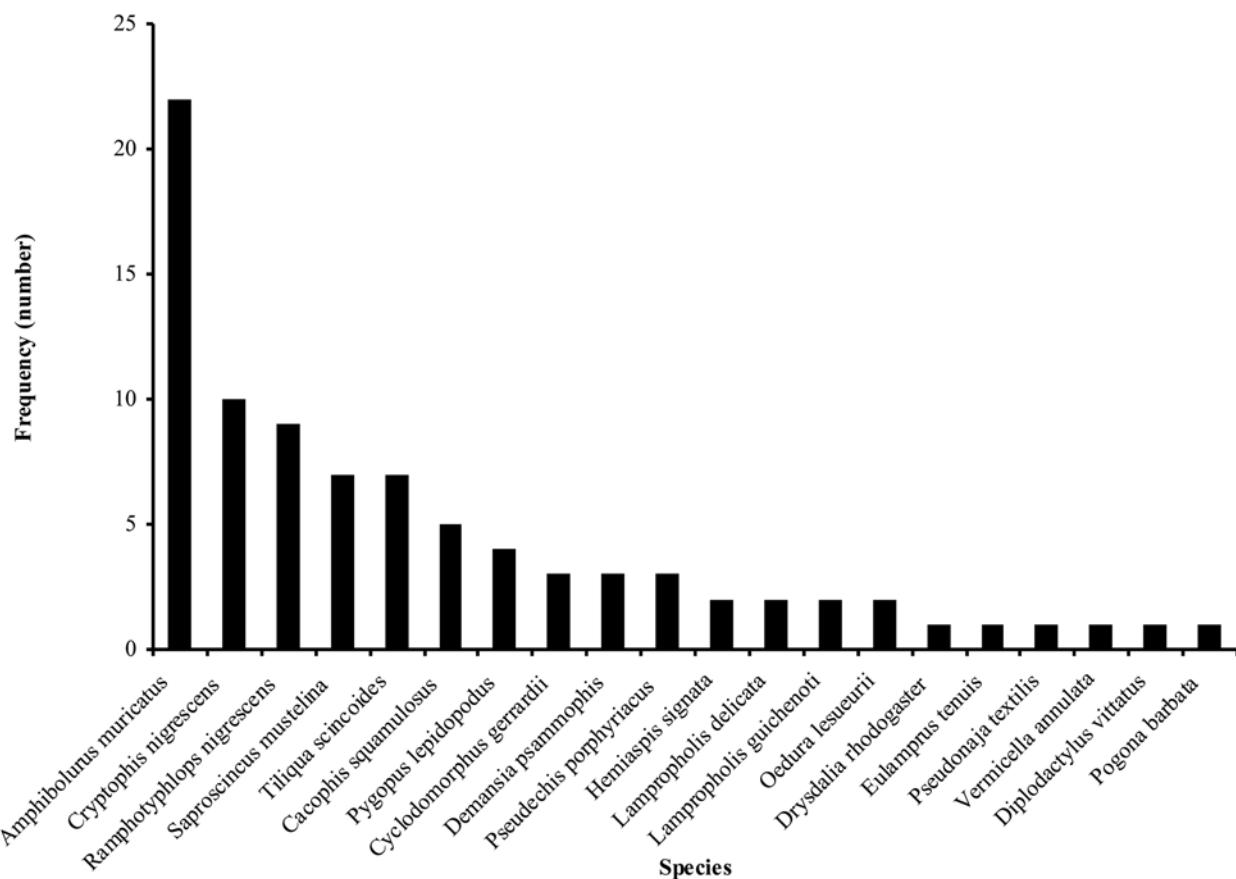


Figure 1. Number of reptile of each species found as road kills on 1.4 km of urban roadway in Faulconbridge (Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area) between 2003 and 2010 (total number collected = 86; common names, see Table 1)

Discussion

Despite the study being restricted to a 1.4 km stretch of suburban streets on the periphery of Faulconbridge, an average of approximately one reptile per month was collected as a result of vehicle collision. This is likely to be a substantial underestimate of mortality because road kills were not collected daily, and the bodies of small animals tend not to persist on roadways after death. For example, Tawny frogmouths *Podargus strigoides* are forest predators and scavengers that are relatively common at Faulconbridge; these birds have been observed removing road kills (Burgin and Brainwood 2008). Other bird species, such as the Australian magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen*; kookaburra, *Dacelo novaeguineae*, Grey butcherbird *Cracticus torquatus*; Anderson and Burgin, 2008), and domestic animals (pers. obs.) also feed on road-killed animals.

Lane and Burgin (2008) reported that there had been a major loss of frogs from both urban and natural areas within the Blue Mountains. The losses were found to be greatest in natural areas. On this basis, they considered that towns of the Blue Mountains could act as a refuge for some species. Other species, such as the vulnerable red-crowned toadlet, are not assisted by residential areas and declines appear to be more pronounced in urban areas.

Species may become locally extinct as a result of new road development (Lunney *et al.* 2002), and the long term viability of some vertebrate populations have been compromised (e.g., Jones, 2000; Ramp and Ben-Ami

2006). The streets sampled for road kills in this study have remained effectively unchanged for over 20 years and, therefore, are not considered to be subject to the impacts that are associated with 'new' roads.

Species that are apparently rare in the local area were found in disproportionately higher numbers as road killed animals. For example, two snake species, the eastern small-eyed and blind snakes, are seldom seen in the area (i.e., < 5 individuals of either species over 27 years, Wotherspoon, pers. obs.) but were among the most commonly encountered reptile deaths on the road. These snakes are secretive, nocturnal species that typically shelter under rocks and in crevices during the day (Cogger 2000). In order to be active at night, these snakes require thermal input. Since the black sealed urban roads would be warmer at night than the surrounding light coloured sandstone rocks, we assume that they are attracted to the roadway to thermoregulate. These observations suggest that road kill data may not directly reflect the abundance of reptiles species in an area.

Jacky dragons were the most commonly encountered road killed reptile. Although this species is considered common in the Sydney region, much of its habitat has been replaced by urbanisation. For example, in the highly fragmented vegetation remnants on the Bonny Doon Golf Course in urban Sydney, a lack of large adults (males and females) were found. In addition, the sex ratio of males and females were equivalent, rather than conform to the expectation that there would be more females than

males in this temperature-dependent sex determined species. This may indicate that the population's long term viability has been compromised by the location (Hitchen *et al.* 2011). In the current study, the largest Jacky dragon found was 125 mm snout-vent length. This is equivalent to that previously reported in the literature (e.g., 117 mm - Harlow and Taylor 2001; 125 mm - Greer 1989; Strahan *et al.* 1992). Despite the losses due to vehicle collision, it is unlikely that the long-term viability of Jacky Dragon is being challenged at the current rate of mortality. On the other hand, large, dominant male eastern bearded dragons are killed on roads with greater frequency than females or smaller males (Wotherspoon, 2008). Although the loss of large females may be considered more critical to the long-term viability of a population, the reproductive outcomes of the population could also be affected with the on-going losses of the dominant males, and the associated struggle for supremacy among sub-dominant males.

Conclusion

On this one section of long-established urban street at the edge of a small town in a low-speed zone, there is an on-going loss of individuals from a substantial number of the native species of herpetofauna due to vehicle collision. Using Google Earth to obtain a 'gross' measure of the extent of similar streets on the perimeter of Faulconbridge, we calculated that there may be 20 - 30 km of such roadways. Extrapolating from the annual road kill death rate we encountered, we estimated that across

2 - 4 days of the week between 176 and 263 reptiles are killed annually at the urban/bushland interface on these low speed limit roads just within Faulconbridge. Since there are 25 other towns and villages that could be considered to average broadly similar perimeters within bushland settings, the road kills of reptiles, just at the interface with the bushland, could conservatively be estimated to be between 4,576 and 6,838 annually. In some areas the loss would be greater, for example, where new roads have been developed (see e.g., Lunney *et al.* 2002), in areas of higher traffic density and/or higher speed zones, and on the wider roads that connect towns and villages (see e.g., Burgin and Brainwood, 2008).

Road kill deaths are also not restricted to reptiles. Data on the number of frogs killed in vehicle collision were not maintained but 33% of local species were represented as road kills. In urban areas, road deaths occurred across all groups of native vertebrate taxa (e.g., Burgin and Brainwood 2008; Harris *et al.* 2008). Our study therefore reveals simply the 'tip of the iceberg' when it comes to the road kill of native species due to collision, even just in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. This is because the data that underpin this study were collected from an urban road with a low volume of traffic. Even within Faulconbridge, this represents a small fragment of the total street area. Although an average death rate of one reptile per month may be considered negligible, we consider that the cumulative loss of reptiles due to vehicle collision in the region is an ecological disaster.

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